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AUTHOR Sherer, Victoria E.; Biemel, Jeanine S.
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ABSTRACT

The Upper Arlington, Ohio school reorganization, in 1983, to include a middle school resulted in the development of a seventh-grade foreign language exploration course. The course provides nine weeks each of French, German, and Spanish, and relates the languages to content areas using an interdisciplinary approach. The fourth nine weeks would be spent in a reading course not taught by the foreign language teachers. Four academic areas (social studies, science, English, and mathematics) are team-taught, and the teachers relate their individual disciplines to the target language and culture. The course emphasis is oral communication, vocabulary is limited to high-frequency expressions, grammar is limited to basic concepts, culture is a significant portion of the content and includes high-interest items, every day the class includes a game or other fun activities, and the course content is easy enough that every student can experience some success. Student evaluations of the course have been positive, parents are enthusiastic, and sixth-graders show eagerness to participate. The eighth-grade language courses are identical to the high school courses, enabling the students to begin serious study immediately and study languages continuously until graduation. Language and content-area staff continuity has been maintained and the administration is supportive, both of which contribute to the increasing enrollments and overall program success. (MSE)

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Foreign Languages in the Middle School: Exploration, Enrollment, Excellence

Victoria E. Sherer and Jeanine S. Biemel
Jones Middle School, Upper Arlington, Ohio

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Throughout the United States many school districts have been reorganizing their structures by replacing the traditional junior high school with a new phenomenon—the middle school. Although the organizational pattern of middle schools varies, the most common includes the sixth grade as a part of the middle school and moves the ninth grade to the high school. This new structure raises, therefore, the question of what to do about foreign languages in the middle school. The answers vary greatly. Some districts have kept their foreign language programs as they are, while others have chosen to exclude foreign language instruction from that level. Other districts have incorporated changes in the foreign language program so that it might better meet the needs of the younger student. These changes have included beginning foreign language instruction in grade six or seven, while at the same time adapting to the learning styles and needs of the younger learner. Other school systems have elected to implement a foreign language exploration course in which the students get a "taste" of several languages and cultures. The rationale for the latter includes the belief that middle school is the time for exploration of many learning areas rather than in-depth study of one subject. The Upper Arlington City Schools in Upper Arlington, Ohio, implemented such a plan in 1983.

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Exploring Foreign Languages

The creation of the Foreign Language Survey Course in Upper Arlington did not come about overnight. It was part of a five-year plan that reorganized the entire district. Because a limited amount has been written about foreign language exploration at the middle school level, the staff needed to rely on its own experience, creativity, and expertise in order to create the survey course.[1] The purpose of this paper is to share the experiences of these foreign language teachers with interested colleagues—especially those who anticipate similar changes in their programs, or wish to modify existing programs.

The reorganization of a school district from the traditional elementary–junior high–high school format to one that includes a grades-six-to-eight middle school is a complex process. In 1978, the Upper Arlington Board of Education initiated the planning for reorganization by forming committees that wrote the philosophy and goals of the program. The philosophy stated in part that the school should provide opportunities that encourage exploration and that it should sustain a climate of vitality and compassion where students feel secure and supported when they encounter difficulties. The next year the curriculum design committee was formed in order to write the design for the grades-six-to-eight curriculum. As the committee began to work on this task, it faced some decisions about foreign language. The original foreign language program began with level one of French, German, and Spanish in the eighth grade. Ohio had not yet established state standards for middle schools, complicating the process of deciding the role of foreign language learning at this level. The committee decided to work within the elementary minimum standards for grade six and secondary standards for grades seven to eight, speculating that middle school standards would be similar. The standards required that a certain amount of time be set aside in grade six for reading. In order to include reading, existing class periods would be shortened, adding an extra period to the school day. This reading period would make it impossible to begin foreign language instruction in the sixth grade but opened a similar block of time where it could start in grade seven. A question still remained: What kind of foreign language class would best meet the

needs of the middle level learner? This question needed to be considered in the context, not only of goals of the program, but also of community standards for education.

The Upper Arlington Schools serve a community of well-educated, upper middle class professionals near Columbus, Ohio. The community is very supportive of the schools and students are highly motivated. Surveys show that 94 percent of the graduates of Upper Arlington High School go on to some form of higher education. What impact does this have on the foreign language instruction? Although increasing enrollment is a goal in most foreign language programs, a healthy 78 percent of these high school students were already enrolled in foreign language classes. From the point of view of the foreign language department, increasing enrollment and interest in foreign language classes was very important; however, equally important was having the opportunity to dispel some of the myths about foreign languages. In the past, students had told teachers that they had chosen a language based on rumors about the difficulty of the language, popularity of the teacher, or the arbitrary decision of which language was "cool." This seemingly random selection of a language gave rise to three goals for the foreign language survey course: (1) to help students decide whether they should take a foreign language in grade eight; (2) to help students make a more informed choice about which language they would elect; and (3) to dispel myths and prejudices about foreign language. A fourth goal was later added—relating foreign languages to other content areas using an interdisciplinary approach. The committee decided that a foreign language survey course would meet these goals. Every seventh grader would be required to explore nine weeks each of French, German, and Spanish in rotation. The fourth nine weeks would be spent in a reading course not taught by the foreign language teachers.

An Interdisciplinary Approach

Once the decision was made to include foreign language exploration as part of the seventh grade curriculum, the foreign language teachers began to write the content of the course. Each language course was designed as an interdisciplinary class to be team-taught with the

teachers of the other four seventh-grade academic areas—social studies, science, English, and mathematics. In Upper Arlington, the middle school students are divided into groups called "houses" (about eighty students in one house), and those students have the same four teachers, called house teachers, for their academic subjects. Although foreign language teachers were not accustomed to a team structure with other academic areas, the new design required a great deal of cooperation between the foreign language teachers and the house teachers. After considering several possibilities, the entire teaching team decided that the most practical approach was for the house teachers to teach one day each week—relating their individual learning areas to each target language and culture. Each house teacher would direct the activity in English and would rotate at two-week intervals among the languages. Students would remain in each language for the entire nine weeks. The purpose of the house teacher's involvement was to demonstrate that foreign language study reaches beyond the foreign language class and relates to many other facets of our lives.

Because, unlike other foreign language courses at this level, the exploratory course is required of every seventh grader, the criteria of the course are different and include the following components:

1. The major emphasis of the course is oral communication.
2. Vocabulary is limited to high-frequency expressions and phrases as well as categories such as food, clothing, colors, numbers, animals, family, school, personal interests, sports, and games.
3. Abstract words and phrases are only presented as they are needed for communication. Grammar is limited to very basic concepts with every effort to avoid verb conjugations.
4. Culture forms a significant portion of the content and includes mostly high-interest items such as food, music, gestures, and animal sounds.
5. Every day the class includes a game, song, puzzle, or other "fun" activity.
6. The course content is easy enough so that every student can experience some success and have a positive experience in the class.

After finishing the first draft copies of each language course, the

foreign language teachers at Jones Middle School received permission to pilot the foreign language survey course with one group of seventh graders and their house teachers. The pilot was an abbreviated version of the course and lasted only six weeks per language instead of nine. This gave the teachers the opportunity to revise materials before the next nine weeks.

Designing the materials for the course was a challenge. The foreign language and house teachers met several times during the summer and worked individually for many hours creating packets for student and teacher use. The foreign language teachers designed student packets about thirty-five to forty pages long. These materials included visuals, dialogues, communicative activities, and simple exercises. Some of the packets included visuals copied (with permission) from level one materials currently in use in the school. Other parts of the packets contained computer-generated puzzles and word-finds, while still others were the teachers' own original ideas. As they created the packet, the teachers began to formulate lesson plans and simple quizzes to use with them.

While the foreign language teachers were preparing these packets, the house teachers were designing materials for their own learning areas. These sample activities illustrate how foreign languages are integrated with other content areas.[2]

Science

1. The teacher assigns students to spend one class period reading an article of their choice from *National Geographic* (each student reads a different article) about a country or region where the target language is spoken. During the next two class periods that the students meet with the house teacher, they share what they have learned from their articles.
2. Students research cookbooks from around the world and choose recipes from regions where the target language is spoken. They share their recipes and discuss why certain ingredients are prevalent and what nutritional value the recipes have. Students then have the option of preparing and bringing in a sample of the food for the class to try.
3. Students are taken to the learning center where they conduct

research about scientists or scientific discoveries dealing with the target country.

4. At the end of the entire rotation, students hold a mock debate of the United Nations in which they play the roles of representatives of many different countries and discuss fishing rights and maritime boundaries.

English

1. Students are provided with a list of English words whose derivations are from the target language and a list of their original meanings and are asked to match the two lists. They then look up the words in a dictionary to check their guesses and write the current meaning of each word. In order to be able to complete this activity successfully, one must use dictionaries that give the language of origin and the old meaning in that language.
2. The teacher reads a poem to the class. The selection includes words in the target language, and the students try to pick them out and guess what they mean. They also discuss the cultural aspects of the poem. For example, the Spanish teacher selected a poem written by a young person from Spanish Harlem.
3. The teacher reads aloud a short story that includes some aspect of the target culture or that takes place in the target country. The class then discusses the cultural material in the story.

Social Studies

1. Students study a map of the United States and geographic locations whose names are in the target language. The class then discusses where these places are clustered and what historical events led to these clusterings.
2. Students measure distances between the United States and the target culture on a world map. They then discuss what these distances mean in terms of ease of travel, available transportation, and the length of time travel to that country would take.
3. The teacher asks students where they plan to go for a certain holiday and they measure the distance on a map of the United

States. They then go to a map of the target culture and measure the same distance from a major city to another city or area. Students are often surprised that the trip they had planned for the United States may be as far as a trip from Madrid to Moscow! This information leads to discussions of various matters (e.g., perceptions of fuel consumption and waste in the United States).

4. Students can also calculate the population density of the United States and that of the target culture based on information about the populations and surface areas that the teacher provides. Discussions can focus on the implications that these figures have for housing, farming, availability of natural resources, etc.

Math

1. Students simulate a real-life activity that involves buying and selling (e.g., moving to a new home, buying supplies for a party, buying a new outfit, buying a new car or bicycle). They must look in the newspaper for the current rate of exchange of foreign money. Using the ads in the same newspaper, they calculate the prices using the monetary units of the target country.
2. Students plan an imaginary trip by car across Europe and calculate mileage (in metrics), time, and cost.

Student and Program Evaluation

Following each nine-week segment of the rotation, students receive a grade in the foreign language survey course. The grade is based on participation, attitude, quiz grades, and homework. There are daily homework assignments that consist of exercises, puzzles, or communicative activities that rarely take more than five minutes to complete. Whenever the student has to write out answers, all the words are nearby for copying so that students do not have to spell from memory. In addition, a few long-range assignments can be given. For an example, students may make a family tree on which they label the members of their families in the target language—they may draw each member or may cut pictures out of magazines. In another project, students are

given a list of items in the target language (e.g., a red dress, a tall man, a blond boy, something to eat) and are provided with magazines. They then go on a "treasure hunt," looking for the items on the list. Working in pairs, they can cut and paste pictures of their treasures and make a collage.

Quizzes are short and simple and include a listening and written section. The listening section usually consists of multiple-choice items or true–false statements. The written part of the quiz is also a multiple-choice format (matching or fill-in), along with simple communicative questions for the students to answer. Again, any word the student needs to spell is found somewhere on the quiz.

Students in the survey course are asked to write their opinions and evaluation of the course in the form of an informal letter to the teacher. Although some students admit that they are nervous about studying three languages, many agree that they soon relax and enjoy the course. Their comments are positive and indicate that they feel the survey course is fun and exciting because it is different from their other coursework. Many seem surprised to find that learning a foreign language can be an easy and pleasant experience. Students seem particularly interested in learning about the foreign culture and comparing it to their own. Parent comments at open houses and on progress report forms generally indicate approval of the course and indicate that they would have welcomed similar foreign language experiences while in school. Even sixth-grade students are excited to find out that they will soon be learning foreign languages.

The Foreign Language Survey Course in Upper Arlington middle schools is successful for several reasons. It provides an inviting, yet challenging, course for students in a community that values excellence in education and opportunity for growth. It provides students with a positive first experience in foreign language and starts their formal study of language in the eighth grade with a solid base. The students have become used to the idea of comparing other cultures with their own and with saying strange sounds and sentences. They can begin their first year of foreign language study knowing the teacher and what he/she expects and feeling comfortable with the language. Because the eighth grade language course is identical to the one offered students at the high school, such an arrangement can provide those eighth graders with a

taste of what a high school course will be. It thus acts as a bridge between the middle school and high school curriculum. Students can receive high school credit for the eighth grade course after securing the twenty credits needed for graduation. Those who begin first year language in the eighth grade may elect to take five years of a language before graduation. A longer sequence such as this enables them to be in a good position to earn proficiency credits in the foreign language at a college or university. Over 90 percent of the eighth grade class at Jones Middle School decides that foreign language will be a part of its school day. It is the "in" thing to take a foreign language.

Building and Maintaining Enrollment

The Foreign Language Survey provides the perfect setting for building enrollment. Students are involved in a positive learning experience and are eager to continue language study. The language teachers spend time with each of their classes discussing which countries speak the languages and reasons each language might be appropriate for individual students. Students and parents alike appreciate this information. Discussions take place in an informal, frank, and matter-of-fact way, and teachers attempt to be objective and detached from the students' language selection process.

Because so much of the vocabulary and structure in the Foreign Language Survey involves communicating about personal preferences, family and school, the foreign language teachers get to know their students and use this opportunity to establish a good rapport with their seventh graders. Commitment to middle-level learners and knowledge of their unique needs and personal interests are important. In addition, fast-paced activities that are geared to be fun and yet provide language practice keep the students as active participants in the learning process. Because the structure of the Foreign Language Survey is different from other classes, this novelty works to the advantage of the program.

Staff continuity also contributes to increasing enrollments. The composition of the middle school language staff has been stable for many years, which enables the teachers to establish a reputation and to work with several children from the same family. In addition, students

are secure in knowing who their language teachers will be the following year. At the middle school level such knowledge can be very important.

Because such a high percentage of Upper Arlington graduates go on to college, most realize early that language study will be a part of the requirements for entrance. In addition, the Upper Arlington High School requires two credits of foreign language or vocational courses for graduation. The level one classes at the middle schools count toward this requirement. These requirements offer a built-in assurance that most students will eventually enroll in foreign language.

Building and maintaining enrollment, therefore, requires a combination of personal and professional investment and commitment on the part of the staff—along with community interest and support from the policy-makers in the district.

Establishing Excellence

With the current emphasis on excellence in education, one might wonder what factors contribute to a successful program. The Upper Arlington Schools serve a community that values education, and because of the demographics of the community, there is a built-in demand that students be prepared for college, business, and travel. The close proximity of The Ohio State University makes it easier for teachers to keep up with current trends in the profession. This combination of support from the community and the university is an important element in achieving excellence.

In addition, a great deal of value is placed on academic as well as athletic competition and achievement. The foreign language program at Jones Middle School is one area in which gifted students have the opportunity to attain their highest potential at the middle school level. Every year, a team of students is formed from each language area—each team works independently to compete in the National Examinations of French, German, and Spanish. The French and Spanish teams also compete in the Ohio Tests of Scholastic Achievement. Under the teacher's supervision, the team works ahead of the class on grammar and culture. Because these students are highly motivated and have demonstrated language aptitude, it is often possible to cover the grammar and vocabulary for the second semester by the end of the first semester at practice

sessions held before or after school or during lunch. Teachers receive a supplementary contract for this work—just as an athletic coach does. Often, after the competition is over, some students will choose to continue working with the team through the spring and summer, which enables them to move from level one to level three the following year.

Within the structure of the foreign language program academic excellence is achieved and maintained—partly because of the strong and effective leadership of the foreign language coordinator and partly because of the common belief of the teachers that coordination and articulation of the program are essential for its success. Teachers meet districtwide and agree on the minimum amount of material that they hope to cover. The language coordinator monitors progress throughout the year to ensure that goals are being met. Teachers often share materials—both within the building and throughout the district. Sharing and communication among staff members are essential elements in the coordination of the program. It should also be noted that the foreign language teachers are working in this program by choice, not by chance and by mandate.

The house teachers involved in the course also contribute significantly to its success. They are open to new ideas and to experimenting with them. They are very supportive of the foreign language teachers and the program and put in many extra hours of work. When not actually teaching, they remain in class as "students" and participate enthusiastically in discussions and activities. Their open and supportive attitude creates a positive influence on the students.

The Ohio State University places many students in the Upper Arlington Schools for field experience and student teaching. The presence of these preservice teachers and their supervisors is beneficial to the language program because it provides an opportunity to keep up with new trends in foreign language education. The availability of these students to work in language classes allows for more individualization and flexibility.

Administrative support is another major factor in the program's success. Because the foreign language teachers have earned a positive reputation in the community, administrators have been extremely supportive. The building principal has given invaluable help in scheduling teachers involved in the course at the same time so that they can work

together. Furthermore, he has publicly praised the program, its teachers, and its students. He invites teachers to attend any school function that will increase their visibility in a positive way and encourages them to publicize language-related events in the community newspaper. The Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum has also been helpful and has provided funds for inservice and summer work. Members of the Board of Education have also been supportive. This support has come about as a result of the reputation the program has established.

Conclusion

The middle school program described in this article includes goals of exploration of a foreign language, building enrollment, and developing a program marked by excellence. It is the authors' belief that these goals have been reached. Exploration of language and culture is achieved through the Foreign Language Survey Course with its interdisciplinary focus. Enrollments are built and increased by careful counseling and public relations activities and with the support of students, teachers, administrators, and the community. Finally, excellence has been achieved through a long and involved process requiring competence, commitment, and unity of educational goals.

Notes

1. For recent articles containing information about middle school language programs, see Kay Thorp, "A Middle School Exploratory Course," pp. 26–33 in Patricia B. Westphal, ed., *Strategies for Foreign Language Teaching: Communication, Technology, Culture*, Report of the Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Co., 1984), and Lael Littlefield and Rafael Grenier, "The Exploratory Wheel: A Foreign Language Program for the Middle School" in this volume.
2. Additional ideas for interdisciplinary activities can be found in Miriam Met, et al., "Elementary School Foreign Language," pp. 18–21 in Robert G. Mead, ed., *Foreign Languages: Key Links in the Chain of Learning*, Report of the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (Middlebury, VT: Northeast Conference, 1983).